'Back to Nature': Changing 'Worlds of Production' in the Food Sector

Jonathan Murdoch and Mara Miele

In Boccaccio's Decameron the citizens of mediaeval Florence flee the city to escape the plague and, in one fell swoop, the city comes to be equated with disease, degradation and death. The countryside, on the other hand, facilitates a flight from human-made squalor and promises a reaffirmation of life in the face of urban horror. We find in *Decameron*, therefore, a reversal of the previously prevailing spatialized moral association, which upheld the city because it offered an escape from the misery and backwardness of rural life, as a locus of 'civilization.' Boccaccio, however, does more than simply reverse this association for he goes on to glorify nature; he extols it for its freedom from the corruption of social life. Nature, through reference to the plague, becomes a source of purity and truth.

In his recent book, *The social construction of nature* (1996), Eder uses this short vignette to illustrate the emergence of what he calls "the double structure of the modern experience of nature" (p. 143). When the citizens of Florence fled into the countryside, in the belief that they were embracing a realm free from the polluting interference of the social, they were, in effect, laying the foundations for a 'moralization' of nature. The mediaeval Florentines were asserting an untainted and unspoiled natural realm as the antidote to all that was thought wrong with the degraded and corrupt city. According to Eder, this conception of nature, established in mediaeval times, re-emerges in the modern era. Perhaps its most well-known proponents could be found in the Romantic movement for they also tended to see nature as "the binding and infallible system of reference beyond everything that is merely artificial" (Eder 1996, p. 144). The Romantic view was, however, not asserted in opposition to occurrences such as plague but rather against a dominant modern perspective which believed nature

Jonathan Murdoch: Department of City and Regional Planning, Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales, UK; Mara Miele: Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Pisa, Italy

Published by Blackwell Publishers,
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

Sociologia Ruralis VOL. 39, NO 4, 1999
ISSN 0038-0199

to be "an object to be used" (p. 145). A view of nature as a 'utilitarian object' both preceded and accompanied the advent of modernity. Modern views of nature tend to fall, therefore, into two main 'camps': nature as the source of ultimate goodness; nature as a resource for human exploitation. We are, therefore, according to Eder,

> confronted . . . with a double process of intensification, which simply does not follow the logic of a zero-sum game. Both instrumental and non-instrumental interaction with nature intensify. On the one hand, the interaction with living nature is instrumentalised . . . On the other hand, this physicality is imbued with morality: it is filled with psyche and equipped with feelings.

Within modernity, then, there can be found an ambivalence towards nature, one which sets different views one against the other: "On the one hand, nature becomes the object of scientific knowledge; it is spied on and its fundamental laws are investigated. At the same time, nature becomes the object of touristic devotion; as 'free' nature, it becomes a medium of recreation" (ibid.). 'Escaping the plague' has, it seems, under conditions of modernity, become almost a public pastime.

Eder argues that this 'double structure' permeates the modernist social realm; it directs and determines the everyday practices of modern citizens so that we all find ourselves acting out either the dominant representation (nature as object to be utilized in accordance with human aspirations) or the repressed representation (nature as a zone apart, imbued with moral authority):

> The double structure of the schemata of experience and perception of nature has its origin in the everyday practices that determine the interaction with nature. The concrete foundation of the double significance of nature is to be sought before any intellectual representation. The ordinary practical basis of the double significance is seen in the dichotomy of city and country. The double symbolisation of nature enters into the antagonism between cultivated land and wilderness. It produces the antagonism between dominance and protection of nature, and it produces the peculiar relationship to animals that is torn back and forth between meat and mercy. It is seen in housing, recreation and, above all, food (ibid. p. 147).

In this paper we wish to take up this last point and consider the double structure discussed by Eder, making particular reference to the modern system of food provisioning. We will show how the two views of nature that make up the double structure are given practical expression within the mass production of food and responses to this form of production. On the one hand, we will point to the growth of the increasingly globalized and standardized food production processes that have seemingly swept all before them in the development of the modern agro-food system. Such production processes have accompanied (or perhaps driven) a set of increasingly globalized mass consumption food patterns which tended to override more local and differentiated consumption practices. Within such practices we can witness a manifestation of the instrumental domination of nature that Eder points to as one part of the double structure. However, more recently we have seen the (re-)emergence of non-standard food production/consumption practices which seem to hold out the prospects of

some potential limits to globalization/standardization. In these alternative food production processes, nature comes to be extolled in terms which tally with the more moralized perspective on nature that Eder sees as the alternative perspective in modernity. In what follows we will investigate the limits of globalization/standardization in the modern food sector and will show how the alternative perspective on nature is implicated in the more localized and differentiated forms of production that are now coming to the fore. In so doing, we employ a perspective derived from the 'theory of conventions' (Boltanski and Thevenot 1991; Salais and Storper 1992, 1997; Storper 1997), which sees production as typically constructed within particular production 'worlds,' that is, according to particular bundles of conventions. We examine the production worlds now comprising the contemporary food system in order to show how nature is being re-asserted in the face of the continuing industrialization of food supply processes and will investigate whether this re-assertion is leading to a 'fragmentation' of mass production in the food sector.

'Outflanking nature': recent developments in the agro-food system

Globalization is perhaps the most outstanding process of change in the contemporary food sector so that the production of food can now take place a considerable distance from its eventual consumption (Bonnano et al. 1994). Globalization of food thus implies a set of pronounced and extended linkages between the sites of production and consumption. These linkages are heterogeneous; they are comprised of multiple technologies, diverse economic actors and various social relations (Goodman et al. 1987; Goodman 1999). The contemporary food system is thus a complex system, and it is bound together by cross-cutting affiliations, strong and loose connections, formal and informal relations, relations which empower and disempower as they bind people and places more tightly together.

In the light of this general trend, recent research into the agro-food system (see for instance Goodman et al. 1987; Goodman and Redclift 1991; Goodman 1991; Goodman and Watts 1994; Goodman and Watts 1997; Whatmore 1994) has tended to focus on how processes of globalization come to be shaped by the biological and physiological properties of food, or, more precisely, by the desire to overcome any natural constraints that might emerge during systems of (capitalist) production. For instance, in order to summarize how capital seeks to 'outflank' nature in the food sector, Goodman et al. (1987) distinguish two interrelated processes: firstly, *appropriationism*, that is the attempt by industrial capitals to replace previously 'natural' production processes by industrial activities; and, secondly, *substitutionism*, or the way industrial capitals seek to substitute their products for natural products in the food system. These two processes can be seen as part of a general attempt to progressively 'squeeze' biological constraints out of the production process so that, in some sense, nature is 'domesticated.' As the processes of appropriationism and substitutionism are pursued so natural constraints are rendered pliable and increasing scope is opened

for long-distance sourcing of diverse food products (see Bonanno et al. 1994). For instance, the use of technologies associated with such activities as food preservation, preparation and packaging can be seen as general attempts to minimize the impacts of the biological or natural content of food products, yet they have also enabled extended linkages between distant places to be forged. Such technologies both preserve food over time and allow its movement over space thereby facilitating globalization.

At the same time, the processes of innovation that have promoted globalization have also encouraged standardization in production and consumption. Standardization, as Schaeffer (1993) shows, has two main aspects and these proceed simultaneously: on the one hand, there are efforts to raise widely recognized 'standards' (e.g., improvements in 'quality') while, on the other hand, there are concerns—especially pronounced in an era when buyers and sellers rarely meet face to face—to develop standardized commodities which can act as a common point of reference. As Schaeffer notes, in certain respects these two dimensions of standardization are in conflict with each other, for commonality and consistency (the second dimension) often imply a lowering of quality (the first dimension). The two dimensions can however be combined so that standardization might refer to "a system in which values are simultaneously raised vertically and extended horizontally" (ibid. p. 73). This system is a kind of 'egalitarian hierarchy' in which common definitions of quality are imposed on diverse products so that they increasingly correspond one with the other. And these standards are crucial in global commodity markets for they allow trade to occur between buyers and sellers who never need meet face to face.

It is generally recognized that globalization in food provisioning has effectively lay beyond the scope of small producers and has been promoted by the giant food companies and large retailers that are thought to be "aggressively transforming the world agro-food economy" (Watts and Goodman 1997, p. 3). The most 'aggressive' firms are usually those producing the most standardized products. Standardization lies at the heart of the globalization process "because uniformity is functional to high volume production and repeat sales" and because producers "have discovered that it is easier to make uniform products with a given technology and relations of production than variegated ones" (Schaeffer 1993, p. 75).

However, while recent work on the globalization of food has concerned itself with "emerging forms of corporate organisation and the concomitant reconfiguration of international production" (Watts and Goodman 1997 p. 4), there has also arisen a recognition that global processes are mediated and sometimes refracted by regional and local specificities (Arce and Marsden 1993), with change at the regional and local level "mediated by inherited structures, creating complex patterns, spatially and temporally differentiated" (Watts and Goodman 1997, p. 10). Thus, despite an overarching concern that those transnational corporations that have emerged in the food sector, such as Coca-Cola, MacDonalds, Unilever, Nestle etc., there is a growing recognition much production remains locally based under some degree of local control. In fact, there is

now a great deal of evidence to suggest that variety and differentiation in food production processes may not simply be passing away as we move towards the full-blown standardized processes deemed to be symptomatic of globalization; these more traditional aspects of food production may actually be enhanced by key trends now sweeping through the agro-food sector (Arce and Marsden 1995). Two are of particular significance: firstly, the increasing affluence of advanced capitalist countries is generally held to have led to the growth of discerning food consumers who have come to demand variety and diversity in food commodities over and above that delivered by standardized production processes. Secondly, food safety concerns, amplified by a series of recent health scares (BSE, salmonella, E. Coli), have resulted in an enhanced consumer awareness with the ways and means of food production and processing.

In the emerging context of concern for variety and safety, 'natural' foods are seen to be of an inherently higher standard than industrial foods (Buck et al. 1997; Tovey 1997). While the former are thought to embody nature's natural safeguards against disease and illness, the latter are seen as compromised by the processes of 'appropriationism' and 'substitutionism' that progressively render nature so pliable (Goodman 1999). Standardized food thus comes to be equated with 'unnatural' food. Part of the problem here is that standardized food seems to come from nowhere in particular (who knows where Coca-Cola is made?) and so cannot be easily traced to any particular site of production (often for good reasons—who wishes to know their pork meal comes from North Carolina's huge industrial pig farms?). Thus, food of clear local provenance is often thought to be of a higher quality (i.e. 'safer') than 'global' food (Nygard and Storstad 1998). Locally recognizable foodstuffs, which bear clear traces of the 'clean' and 'green' environments in which they have been produced, become desirable objects of consumption for they enshrine both product differentiation and proximity to nature. We might thus conclude that quality food, which is linked to "traditions, tastes and food cultures," may set some limits to globalization processes within the food sector (Nygard and Storstad 1998, p. 39).

Fragmentation in the food system: towards a framework for analysis

Following the preceding discussion we can assert that the contemporary food sector is bifurcating into two main 'zones' of production: standardized, industrialized global food networks on the one hand, localized, specialized production processes on the other. Given that socio-natural relations are differentially constructed in each of the two general production areas (in ways which conform to Eder's 'double structure') it will be useful to identify how the chains or networks that are established in each zone of production differentially construct socio-natural relations so that we can then go on to assess how the 'push and pull' between the two sides of Eder's double structure might be reconfiguring the relationships between producers and consumers. In this section we begin to specify how these relations might be analyzed and outline a theoretical framework appropriate to this task.

Before outlining the framework we should note that a key problem in formulating an analysis of this kind lies in the notion of standardization. As discussed in the previous section, there are two meanings of this term: the raising of quality standards and the assertion of common systems of comparison. It was mentioned above that these two dimension of quality may be in potential conflict with one another as the former implies differentiation while the latter implies some degree of uniformity. However, in certain key respects the two dimensions are mutually dependent. Consider this quotation cited by Schaeffer: "Everyone talks about quality, [but] when asked few people can come up with a consistent answer. Two traders speaking on the telephone can be talking about quality with little or no understanding because each trader has a different point of reference in mind. . . Quality standing alone, without appropriate descriptive adjectives, has little meaning" (Brunk 1989 quoted in Schaeffer 1993). This quotation implies that the raising of quality standards can only be conducted once there are common reference points and that common reference points are hard to discern. Clearly, globalization has ensured that a variety of new standards have emerged but these have tended to be driven by the precepts of appropriationism and substitutionism. They have enshrined the concerns of industrial transnationals and have rendered quality into a set of narrow efficiency and cost concerns.

In the previous section we pointed to alternative sets of standards concerned with proximity to nature, that is, in opposition to the narrow conceptions of quality in the industrial food chains, where nature has been continually 'outflanked,' a return to nature can be discerned in newly (re)emerging food production circuits. The standards which prevail in these 'alternative' chains or networks are likely then to differ markedly from those which govern the industrial chains or networks. We can speculate that they will we be less oriented to efficiency and competitiveness (in terms of cost and price) but will attempt to trade on the basis of environmental, nutritional and/or health qualities. While these latter qualities have not been entirely absent from industrial food chains there is a suspicion (displayed by a growing number of consumers) that they have been downplayed in comparison to the standards surrounding cost and price. In other words, the drive to cheaper food in mass markets (organized around appropriationism and substitutionism) has undermined many of the 'natural' relations that might otherwise provide common standards of production.

In order to scrutinize the differing combinations of standards and qualities which comprise the networks of standardization and quality we adopt here the 'theory of conventions' (Boltanski and Thevenot 1981: Storper and Salais 1997; Wilkinson 1997) for this approach has given a great deal of attention to the qualities inherent in different production systems. Because it focuses upon the assembling of materials within the various 'action frameworks' which comprise production processes, conventions theory aims to highlight the complex socio-natural relations that comprise contemporary production sectors. In what follows, we wish to consider how far this theory might aid the analysis of the

different socio-natural 'mixtures' that become implicated in the various relations established between producers and consumers in the food sector. Firstly, we outline the general dimensions of the theory and, secondly, we go on to apply these theoretical observations to two case studies drawn from our own work on quality food in Italy.

According to Storper (1997, p. 36; see also Salais and Storper 1992, 1997) conventions theory views productive activity as a form of 'collective action,' one which relies upon the co-ordination of various entities and actors within some type of 'action framework' (network, *filière*, chain, etc.). At the heart of this collective action are 'conventions,' which are defined as the "practices, routines, agreements, and their associated informal and institutional forms which bind acts together through mutual expectations" (Salais and Storper 1992). These mutual expectations are in large part established around common systems of evaluation or 'qualification' (which is understood literally to mean the establishment of quality) and come to be 'embodied' in the product (see also Wilkinson 1997, p. 330). Thus the product itself encapsulates the various 'trade-offs' that have been executed in the production process between the various standards and qualities and these trade-offs will determine just how nature is reconfigured in any given instance.

Conventions come to be construed by two institutional forms: on the one hand, there are sets of standardized, codified rules and norms that impose conventions across a range of diverse contexts; on the other hand, conventions may emerge from local, personalized, idiosyncratic sets of relations. However, in practice these two main forms may be hard to distinguish as they often take the guise of a "halfway house between fully personalised and idiosyncratic relations and fully depersonalised easy-to-imitate relations" (Storper 1997, p. 38). While two ideal institutional types can be discerned the range of conventions is rather more complex. Boltanski and Thevenot (1991; Thevenot 1998), for instance, break the likely candidates down into six categories along the following lines: commercial conventions (e.g., evaluations by price); domestic conventions (e.g., attachments to place and tradition); industrial conventions (e.g., efficiency and reliability); public conventions (e.g., recognition of trademarks and brands); and civic conventions (e.g., ecological, health and safety issues). These come to be assembled in production systems as a result of socio-economic negotiation as well as the assembling of various materials.

If we link together the two main institutional types distinguished by Storper with the categories outlined by Thevenot then we might begin to understand how particular bundles of conventions frequently come to compose different types of production networks. Storper, in fact, (along with Salais, see Salais and Storper 1992, 1997) does go on to further elaborate his ideal types in ways which further assist this 'bundling' of conventions. He identifies so-called 'worlds of production' which are derived from a mixture of institutional forms and product types divided into two dimensions of production (see Figure 1). These two dimensions distinguish, firstly, whether the product is 'standardized' or 'specialized' and, secondly, whether it is 'generic' or 'dedicated.' On the

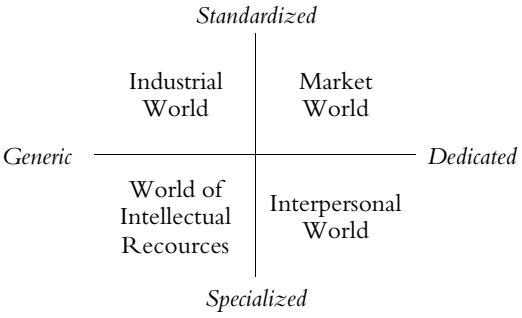

Figure 1: Storper's two dimensions of production

one hand, a standardized product is produced using widely diffused production methods so that competition comes to be inevitably centred on price (Storper 1997). The specialized product, on the other hand, is made with technology and know-how that is restricted so that competition is centred on 'quality.' On the second dimension, a generic product carries with it such well-known qualities that it can be sold directly on to the market but this will be a predictable market where the likely consumers are a relatively stable and foreseeable number. A dedicated product, by contrast, is oriented towards a very particular set of clients; it is often a customized product where the 'market' is composed of interpersonal negotiations. These dimensions of production and product types demarcate different productive 'worlds' for, in order to meet the qualities demanded, "each world must develop its own internal conventions of resource deployment, with respect to its suppliers, its factor markets, and its own internal structure" (Salais and Storper 1992, p. 182).

These four worlds of production describe 'action frameworks' (ibid., p. 117) in which different combinations of conventions logically mesh together. Thus, on the one hand, in the Industrial World of standardized-generic production we would expect to find conventions associated with commercialism, efficiency and branding as particular significant. On the other hand, in the Interpersonal World of specialized-generic production we would expect to find conventions associated with health, ecology and trust prevailing. Presented in this fashion it is clear that the theory of conventions maps easily onto the bifurcated food system discussed in the first section above for we would expect to find the conventions associated with the Industrial World to be dominant in the industrialized, standardized ('Fordist') food sector while those linked to the Interpersonal World would be expected to prevail in alternative food circuits (see Murdoch et al. 2000) for an extended discussion of this issue). In the next section we outline how the theory can be utilized by applying it to two case studies.

Consuming quality: changing worlds of production in the Italian food sector

Because much of the work conducted on the food system to date has—as we discussed in the first section—concentrated on globalization and industrialization in the agro-food sector (see Bonnano et al. 1994; Goodman and Watts 1997 as good examples)—which can be characterized in Storper's terms as a focus on the 'Industrial World' in which increasing standardization in the manufacture of generic food products has been prevalent—we turn our atten-

tion to the possible existence of the other worlds in the food system. In this section, therefore, we outline two case studies drawn from our research into food production/consumption processes in one of the 'hotspots' of quality food production, central Italy. We attempt to show here that the main trends in food production are not moving in one direction only—i.e., into the Industrial World (as perhaps they have been for much of the post war period, when mass production processes were at the height of their powers)—but, as a result of new trends in food *consumption*—i.e., a growing fragmentation and diversification in the demand for foods (Buck et al. 1997; Malassis and Ghersi 1995; Tovey 1997)—are moving in a number of directions simultaneously. Our case studies document two movements: the first concerns a company which was firmly positioned in the Industrial World, where the conventions of price competition and efficiency dominate, but which gradually opened up lines of production which fit in the Market World; the second refers to a group of producers who were located in the Interpersonal World but began to execute a move into the Market World.

The two case studies presented here concern, firstly, the production of eggs and, secondly, the distribution and selling of organic meat. As we mentioned earlier, we outline these in order to illustrate the complex nature of modern food production. However, we also indicate how the rise of a new culture of consumption, centered upon the search for a healthier diet and the rediscovery of traditional *cuisines*, has led to a rapid growth in demand for traditional products and organic, animal-friendly foods in Italy and elsewhere. We show that growing consumption demand for the ecological and local qualities of food has created new opportunities for those producers who are still embedded in the 'traditional' worlds of dedicated and specialized production (as is shown below in the case of organic meat) (see also Kaltoft 1999). However, this new consumption context has also led to some 'vanguard' companies (i.e., those who have been leaders in the Industrial World) into diversifying their productive activities in an attempt to meet the new demands. This can be seen in the first case of Ovopel and free-range eggs.

Ovopel: From standardization to specialization

Our first case thus concerns one company, Ovopel, which is today the largest egg producer in Italy. The firm was established by Lino Pellizzoni who set up a small hen-farm (500 hens) in Casalmaggiore, in the heart of the Po Valley, in 1959. A year later he developed a wholesale egg business with a distribution on a national scale, using the brand name Pellizzoni Eggs. During the following 20 years the company expanded and in 1979 was authorized to produce 400,000 eggs per day. Eight years later the company changed its name, to Ovopel s.r.l.

While Ovopel has consolidated its hold on the Italian egg market, and can therefore be considered a leading producer of standardized and generic food according to the conventions of efficiency and price competitiveness, it has recently been seeking to diversify into new markets. For instance, in 1988 it

Figure 2

introduced a new product, the Ovolungo or Egg-salami (Fig. 2). This rather novel invention is made of eight 'extra-quality' fresh eggs, with no added preservatives, combined to obtain a new long shape, around 20 cm in length. It is available as either fresh or frozen, it is packed separately and sold in ten-pieces boxes. The development of this new production line was effectively an attempt by Ovopel to produce a dedicated product as a complement to its standard generic output, as the company's promotional material indicates:

> [Egg-salami] is tasty, practical, natural, easy to use on every occasion: it is time-saving because you do not have to boil and peel eggs, it is also economic because there is no waste. As a matter of fact, it is Ovopel's modern answer to future customer's needs and desires. It can be cut with a normal knife or with a special slicer, which enables you to obtain forty perfectly equal slices; they will give a touch of class to your dishes. No utensils to clean, a lot of time and work saving. All slices have the same size, there is no waste and no typical greenish yolk colour. Also, Egg-salami is space-saving, because it takes less space than 8 eggs for storing. It is ideal for garnishing, hors d'oeuvres, canapès, sandwiches, salads, pizzas, cold dishes and it is great with vegetables, meat and cheese. But you can use it for whatever original and appetizing dish your creativity will suggest.

We do not wish to dwell on this product here except to note that it marked the first attempt by Ovopel to move away from the standardized-generic system towards one based on more dedicated production. With the egg-salami it fabricated a new standardized product tailored to the requirements of a given set of customers, notably the catering trade. Moreover, the success of the egg-salami allowed the company to create stable connections with several catering industries and in 1990 Ovopel becomes the sole agent in Italy for DANEGG, a Danish firm specializing in egg products for catering. A few years later Ovopel moved even further in this direction and began to produce frozen crepes and frozen omelets, again for the catering sector.

It is clear that this first round of innovation marked only a partial move between 'productive worlds' for the company was clearly utilizing its existing resources to produce another product which had the potential to lead to even more standardization in the consumption of eggs (e.g., 'forty perfectly equal slices'). However, in 1991, following the success of animal friendly-egg products in the north of Europe, Ovopel became the first firm in Italy to produce

and distribute free-range farmed eggs using the brand name Uova della corte (translated roughly as 'eggs from the farm yard'). While the term 'free-range' is frequently rather vague, under the Ovopel system it refers to farms where seven hens share an area of 1 square metre, which means only 7,000 hens per 1000 square metres. Ovopel thus presents its free-range eggs as high in quality and safer than standard eggs:

> Advantages are conspicuous, because in such a *natural* conditions open-range farmed hens produce extra-quality eggs. A dense and compact albumen is typical in high quality eggs; the shell is harder, yolk and albumen have a greater density and fluidity, the taste is more intense and savoury. But the most typical aspect is their freshness. Eggs are collected daily from the farms, they are immediately selected according to very strict quality parameters and they are delivered to the point of sale. Hens are fed on a totally vegetable and natural diet; the source food is soybean and alfalfa, therefore it is very low-fat with a subsequent cholesterol reduction if compared with traditional eggs. *The natural environment,* the limited production and the strict quality controls will enable you to appreciate the delicious and *genuine taste of these real country eggs*. In such conditions hens health is generally better; every week the competent sanitary inspectors certify the lack of salmonella germs thus protecting the consumer *safety*.

Under the Ovopel production system the hen eggs can be collected automatically or manually. Hens have nests at their disposal, when eggs are automatically picked up they slide on a belt which gently carries them in a packing room. Nevertheless, in the Ovopel commercial they only show pictures of the manual collection in order to stress the image of a more 'animal friendly.' 'human based' system of production. So while production is still standardized here it is targeted at consumers concerned with both their own and the animals' welfare and therefore gives civic conventions a much higher profile. It thus marks a much more robust move by Ovopel into the Market World.

The eggs were marketed in ways which highlighted the 'animal-friendly' and 'natural' methods of production that were deemed to clearly set them apart from standardized, mass-produced eggs. Their distinctiveness was highlighted by the packaging, a small blue box with the brand name Uova della corte Ovopel s.p.a (in Italy, the only blue box among the most common white ones). And this approach seemed to work: the total sales of the free-range eggs was 10,422,968 during the first year of production. Since then there has been a constant growth in demand for the product: between 1994 and 1996 sales increased by 100 per cent, reaching the level of 50,000,000 eggs and today the Uova della corte, while still the only free-range farmed hen egg in Italy, represent 5 per cent of the total market for eggs. Thus Ovopel believes it is successfully meeting a growing consumer concern for 'animal friendly' products:

> Maybe it is because of the recently promoted animal-welfare campaigns which have attacked battery farms, or maybe it is because of the rediscovery of all that is *healthy* and *natural*. What is sure is that eggs from open-range farmed hens, which can walk freely and peck soybean, corn and alfalfa in their roosts, are becoming more and more appreciated by consumers (Ovonews n.1 Jan.1997: 8-9).

More recently the company has attempted to enhance its reputation as a 'socially responsible' firm by explicitly linking its products to AVSI (Associazione Volontari per il Servizio Internationale), an NGO which gives support to development projects in marginal areas (such as central Africa and the Brazilian favelas), mainly focused on children under the slogan 'Condividere i bisogni, per condividere il senso della vita' (sharing needs for sharing a sense of life). Furthermore, in 1999, Ovopel opened up an 'organic' line of production, Coccodì Bio, which again promotes 'natural and 'animal-friendly' qualities of the company's food.

In Storper's terms we can chart the development of this company as a move from the mainly standardized-generic production of eggs, towards a plurality of new products, 'dedicated' to specific groups of consumers (see Figure 3).

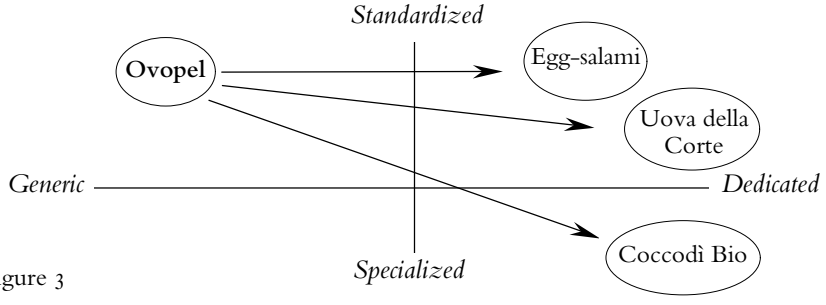

Figure 3

From 1959 to 1988 the company developed according to the principles of standardization through the mass production of a generic product, based on conventions of efficiency and price. It then began to customize its products (egg-salami, frozen-crèpes, frozen omelets) and from 1988 onwards began to produce the more 'natural,' 'animal friendly' free-range eggs, ultimately moving into the organic sector. In so doing it began to assert civic conventions much more robustly. And, by diversifying its productive activities away from the Industrial World, one of the major egg producers in Italy succeeded in constantly enlarging its share of the market.

Organic meat and NaturaSì: from specialization to standardization

During the 1980s there was a remarkable growth in the organic production of fruit and vegetables in the Veneto region of Italy, mainly as a result of consumer demand emanating from the northern European countries. However, while the export markets provided a firm basis for production (almost 50 per cent of regional organic production was for export at this time), there was a desire on the part of regional producers to expand regional and national demand for organic food. However, they believed that a key obstacle inhibiting any expansion of the Italian market was believed to be the lack of dedicated distributors. The region's leading five organic co-operatives therefore decided to create their own distribution network and in 1993 they set up a company named Brio, located in Vicenza, to specialize in the distribution of organic products.

While Brio was established to handle mainly *local* organic produce, during the first year of operation it became a reference point for many organic producers all over Italy and so in 1995 the company decided to launch a chain of small supermarkets (or franchising shops) under the name NaturaSì (from the Austrian equivalent *Ja! Natürlich).* The original plan was to establish a chain of twenty-three supermarkets located in the North and Centre of Italy, where a latent demand for organic products was believed to exist. During the following two years Brio opened sixteen NaturaSì supermarkets in Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy and Tuscany. The company's strategy was summarized (in an interveiw with the authors) by Brio's president in the following way:

> The number of the organic sales in Italy would not have suggested a move in that direction [i.e. creating a supermarket chain dedicated to organic products] but we were willing to take this chance and we believe that this market will grow in the near future. First of all we want to sell our own products and we also want to create a modern distribution channel in which the variety and the quality of the organic products is comparable to the conventional ones, and the price gap between equivalent products is kept within an acceptable range. Up to now the final price for consumers of many organic products has been affected much more by the inefficiency of the distribution channels than by the higher cost of production.

As these comments indicate, the establishment of this company marks an attempt to bring some standardization to the production of organic food as the principles of conventional retailing were applied to a form of production which had previously relied on either exports or very localized sales. In the process, the domestic and civic conventions which had prevailed in the sector had to be more closely aligned with those we might label industrial and commercial.

In 1998 the company decided to move further in this direction and opened its first butcher's shop, CarneSì, for organic meats and organic meat products. It also launched a new meat product, la PrimaVera (First True)[1], which was effectively a new standardized meat product, one which integrated many of the diverse local products which had dominated the sector. This was a significant innovation, not only because it brought more systematic selling techniques to the organic sector—making organic meat a little more 'generic'— but because it rendered organic meat much more *visible* (in Thevenot's terms, more 'public') than hitherto.

Even though during the previous five years there has been a remarkable increase in the number of organic farms in Italy, those producing organic meat remained a small proportion of the total (despite the fact that the presence of animals is considered important in organic processes of production, notably for guaranteeing the fertility of the soil with manure). The main obstacle was the lack of any specific regulations (both at European level and at national level) governing organic meat. This made it more difficult for organic farms to sell their products as certified organic.[2] Thus most organic farms tended to sell meat directly to conventional butchers as a standard, *non-organic* products (see Miele et al. 1997). As a result, the market for organic meat remained extremely limited; the only stores stocking this product being specialist organic food shops

and even here the choice was usually confined to one or two types of meats, for example chicken and beef. The few processed meats (cured hams, salami) available were usually imported from Germany or The Netherlands. La PrimaVera was therefore an attempt to standardize regional (or Italian) organic meats in order to raise their profile for consumers.

It is significant therefore that NaturaSì, the first supermarket chain in Italy to offer mostly organic foods, should establish the first butcher's shop dedicated only to organic meats (in Verona in 1998). Again, this seemed a risky venture as the following comment from the marketing manager of CarneSì indicates:

> the numbers (in terms of sales) would not have suggested to move in this direction: meat and meat products represent only 0.4 per cent of the total organic food sales. From our experience in NaturaSì, the consumers who are interested in organic products have a lower consumption of meat; many of them are vegetarian or are concerned with animal rights and prefer to shop in our supermarket just because of the broader offer of meat substitutes (seitan and tofu) and foods suitable for vegetarians. In our supermarkets the butcher counter has a very limited space, and we did not want to give more space to it, since it would have been a unwelcome presence for our most frequent consumers.

On the one hand, the establishment of CarneSì would seem to indicate the need to separate meat from other natural, organic products due to animal welfare considerations. However, it would appear that NaturaSì were also well-aware that the market for meat was changing due to some of the problems associated with the more standardized/generic production systems. Again the marketing manager explained this in the following way:

> . . . we had a perception that after the BSE scare in March 1996, and the long debate on animal welfare and loss of quality in industrial production, that dominated the media in the following three or four months in Italy, a growing number of consumers would have been interested in organically produced meat and traditional cured hams or salamis. Therefore, we started a line of very traditional meat products, exclusively organically produced, called 'la PrimaVera,' and looking at the example of The Netherlands, their specialized butcher's shops gave us the idea of moving in that direction for commercializing them. In April 1998 we opened the first butcher's shop in Verona, and in the coming year we are planning to open two more shops in Milano and Padova. It is too early to say whether this is a successful choice or not, we represent the first example in Italy, but other companies are already trying to imitate us, Coop Italia[3] and Fin Iper, which means that we are not the only one with this vision of the future market of meat.

Thus, the visibility of organic meat was made easier once the problems associated with standard meat products became known in the wake of BSE. The organic producers, and the companies selling organic products saw an opportunity to give the 'healthier,' 'safer' and more 'natural' organic meat products a higher profile and this seemed to meet consumer demands for this type of meat product. They thus rationalized the various organic meats being produced in the region into one product—la PrimaVera—and consolidated the market for organic meat products.

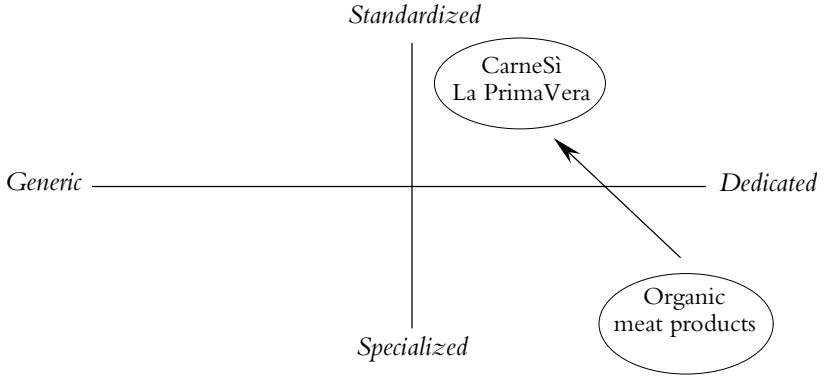

Figure 4

The establishment of CarneSì completes a movement through the 'worlds of production' for the farmers' co-operatives in Veneto (see Figure 4). They began in the specialized and dedicated world of 'interpersonal' production (to use Storper's term) where they concentrated on the domestic and civic conventions that comprise the production of 'natural,' 'healthy,' 'safe' organic food. However, in order to reach a broader number of consumers within Italy they embarked on a process of standardization, through the production of la PrimaVera. Thus local negotiations with long-standing customers gave way to more formal sets of relations in longer, more distant distribution networks. However, the establishment of these new networks also allowed many farmers to sell their meat as organic for the first time. In the absence of the alternative chain of distribution many farmers had been forced to sell to local butchers where the process of (specialized) production passed unrecognized. Thus the more formal processes of distribution enabled farmers to re-assert the dedicated nature of their products. Once again, then, we see producers participating in a number of different 'worlds' simultaneously.

Discussion

The two case studies underline different movements through the 'worlds of production.' The case of Ovopel is presented as the movement of a single company, one of the biggest in Italy, from the production of a standardized and generic product (battery eggs)—which tended to embody the qualities of efficiency and price competitiveness—towards more specialized egg products, targeted more explicitly on a given sub-set of consumers, notably the catering trade and those concerned about animal welfare. The case of organic meat represents an opposite movement: a large number of small organic producers, embedded in a traditional world of production of dedicated and specialized products, collectively establish a commercial structure (Brio), a chain of franchising organic shops (NaturaSì and CarneSì) and develop a more standardized

product (la PrimaVera). The process of 'innovation' here involved a partial standardization of a 'dedicated' organic product.

The case studies do share a common feature: the two 'movements' come from a perception of a new demand for 'traditional' and 'natural' foods. The Ovopel company had a 'vision' of an expanding market for more animal friendly eggs and took a calculated risk by moving in that direction, since free-range eggs were totally unknown at that time on the Italian market (raising the interesting question of whether the company created demand or simply responded to latent consumer desires for animal-friendly eggs). The five farmer's cooperatives in Veneto also had a 'vision' of an expanding market for organically-produced foods and decided therefore to create their own alternative distribution networks, since the conventional channels could not easily handle their dedicated and specialized products (and, again, the success of the companies here raises the question of whether some level of demand was already there to be 'exploited'). As a part of this move they sought to rationalize meat production into a more clearly defined product with a higher public profile than the range of locally specific products which preceded la PrimaVera. Thus, while the cases show movements in different directions (albeit towards the same 'world of production'), these two ventures indicate not a further round of industrialization (as the emphasis on globalization might lead us to expect) but growing complexity in the sphere of food production. This complexity results as producers seek to meet the needs of consumers who, in the face of perceived problems in the Industrial World of food production (ill-health, disease etc.), are seeking out new qualities in the food they buy. No longer is price the only guide; now ecological, health and animal welfare issues combine to reconfigure both consumption demands and production practices in the food sector.

Conclusion

Using the conventions theory framework we have tried to show here that the modern food system is increasing in complexity. This finding runs against the grain of many contemporary food sector studies which tend to see simplification emerging from the processes of standardization that have seemingly carried all before them in the post war period. During this time an increasingly globalized system has emerged, one that has tied together producers and consumers, often spatially distant from one another, using sophisticated technological innovations in transportation, packaging and storage. Large scale, transnational food companies have come to dominate this system and have sought to standardize not only production practices but also consumer tastes so that mass production in the food sector runs in parallel to mass consumption. However, more recently, significant trends have emerged which undermine many of the assumptions that lie behind the globalization perspective. New cosmopolitan consumers are increasingly aware of food from many different places but show some interest in 'dedicated' rather than 'generic' products. This interest derives not only from questions of taste (which might be linked, as in

Bourdieu 1984, to questions of social identity) but, more prosaically perhaps, to questions of health and safety. A series of food sector scares, which have also been 'global' in scope, have led to an increased awareness of the industrialized methods of production which drive globalization. Thus consumers have turned back to 'local' and 'natural' foods in the hope that these embody ecological worth, traditional values and animal-friendly practices. By embracing such qualities consumers appear to hope that they can avoid the problems associated with the drive for efficiency and low prices.

The two case studies presented above illustrate the new complexity in food production. The first (Ovopel) shows how even those actors which have successfully consolidated their positions in the Industrial World of standardized and generic production are looking for ways of meeting the new consumption demands. This does not mean that such companies move out of the Industrial World altogether; they simply seek to diversify their activities so as capture as many markets as possible. In so doing they will no doubt seek to render their dedicated products into more generic forms but we can speculate that they can only go so far in this direction before they undermine the consumer trust upon which they have built these new production lines. The case of organic meat illustrates a different tendency. It shows how a group of specialized producers of dedicated products sought to respond to the growing demand for 'healthy,' 'natural' food by establishing more efficient channels of distribution (perhaps emulating distributors of generic goods) and by standardizing the production of a product (organic meat) that had previously remained hidden from view. This latter innovation was prompted by increasing consumer concerns about the quality of mass-produced generic meat products. While both the cases show movements towards the Market World, they do so from very different starting points.

These two cases also illustrate how the 'double structure' of instrumental and non-instrumental perspectives on nature plays itself out in the contemporary food sector. On the one hand, the processes of standardization that comprise the Industrial World of food production, such as mass egg production, extend instrumental relations through processes of appropriation and substitution. These two tendencies effectively seek to marginalize nature in food production by replacing natural production processes with industrial ones. The post war period has witnessed a profound growth in the industrial production food and this has increased the degree of 'globalization' in the sector. However, nature displays resilient tendencies and has, on occasion, acted like a 'boomerang' (Beck 1992); it has bounced back with some untoward consequences for human consumers. These untoward consequences have therefore led many consumers to seek to (re-)establish relations with the natural qualities deemed to be inherent in more traditional foods. They have thus moved back towards a set of understandings which see nature as something to be nurtured and maintained outside the simple instrumentalizations which underlie industrial production. In many ways, then, modern consumers are acting like the mediaeval citizens of Florence. In attempting to flee modern 'plagues'—of which BSE is potentially

one of the most terrifying—they run back into the arms of nature, a nature that is, as far as possible, free from the overt manipulations that comprise the instrumental side of the 'double structure.'

Notes

1. The name for the new line of organic meat products 'PrimaVera' has been chosen for its double meaning: when it is written in one word (primavera) it means *Springtime*; when it is written in two words (prima vera) it means the *First True*.
2. Organic farming is regulated by the EU Reg. n. 2092/91 but this regulation does not include specific schemes of animal farming. On this matter it referrers to the IFOAM rules or the national regulations. The European Commission has been debating a specific reg. (366/98) for some time, without success even though after the BSE scare in 1996, there has been a growing demand for organic meat all over Europe and a growing interest in speeding up the debate. In Europe there are only a few countries with a national regulation for organic husbandry (Sweden, Germany, Austria, Great Britain, Denmark and France). In Italy there is not a national law on organic husbandry, but there are several regional laws on organic farming which include specific norms for animal rearing.
3. Coop Italia is the largest food retailing company in Italy and is well known for being innovative in terms of its marketing strategies. It is therefore significant that such a company should try to imitate a small distribution chain like NaturaSì.

References

Arce, A. and T. Marsden (1993) The social construction of international food: a new research agenda. *Economic Geography* 69, pp. 291-311

Arce, A. and T. Marsden (1995) Constructing quality: emerging food networks in the rural transition. *Environment and Planning* A 27, pp. 1261-1279

Beck, U. (1992) *The risk society* (London: Sage)

Boltanski, L. and L. Thevenot (1991) *De la justification: les économies de la grandeur* (Paris: Gallimard)

Bonanno, A. et al. (1994) *From Columbus to ConAgra: the globalization of agriculture and food* (Laurence: Univ. of Kansas Press)

Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction* (London: Routledge)

Buck, D., C. Getz and J. Gutham (1997) From table to table: the organic vegetable commodity chain of Northern California. *Sociologia Ruralis* 37, pp. 3-20

Eder, K. (1996) *The social construction of nature* (London: Sage)

Goodman, D. (1991) Some recent tendencies in the industrial reorganization of the agrifood system. In W. Friedland et al. eds, *Towards a new political economy of agriculture* (Boulder, CO: Westview)

Goodman, D. (1999) Agro-food studies in the 'age of ecology': nature, corporeality, bio-politics. *Sociologia Ruralis* 39, pp. 17-38

Goodman, D. and M. Redclift (1991) *Refashioning nature: food, ecology and culture* (London: Routledge)

Goodman, D., B. Sorj and J. Wilkinson (1987) *From farming to biotechnology* (Oxford Blackwell)

Goodman, D. and M. Watts (1994) Reconfiguring the rural or fording the divide? Capitalist restructuring and the global agro-food system. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 22 (1), pp. 1-49

Kaltoft, P. (1999) Values about nature in organic farming practice and knowledge. *Sociologia Ruralis* 39, pp. 39-53

Malassis, L. and G. Ghersi eds (1995) *Introduzione all'economia agroalimentare* (Bologna: Il Mulino)

Miele, M. (1998) *La Commercializzazione dei prodotti biologici in Europa* (Firenze Effemme Lito)

Miele, M., P. Carotta and G. Blandini (1997) *La zootecnia biologica in Toscana* (Firenze Quaderno ARSIA)

Murdoch, J., T. Marsden and J. Banks (2000) Quality, nature and embeddedness: some theoretical considerations in the context of the food sector. *Economic Geography*, forthcoming.

Nygard, B. and O. Storstad (1998) De-globalization of food markets? Consumer perceptions of safe food: the case of Norway. *Sociologia Ruralis* 38, pp. 35-53

Salais, R. and M. Storper (1992) The four worlds of contemporary industry. *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 16, pp. 169-193

Salais, R. and M. Storper (1997) *The worlds of production* (Harvard MA: Harvard Univ. Press)

Schaeffer, R (1993) Standardization, GATT and the fresh food system. *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* 3, pp. 71-81

Storper, M. (1997) *The regional world* (London: Guilford Press)

Thevenot, L. (1998) Innovating in 'qualified' markets: quality, norms and conventions. Paper presented at 'Systems and trajectories of innovation' conference, Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkely, April

Tovey, H. (1997) Food, environmentalism and rural sociology: on the organic farming movement in Ireland. *Sociologia Ruralis* 37, pp. 21-37

Watts, M. and D. Goodman (1997) Agrarian questions. In D. Goodman and M. Watts eds, *Globalizing food: agrarian and global restructuring* (London: Routledge)

Whatmore, S. (1994) Global agro-food complexes and the refashioning of rural Europe. In A. Amin and N. Thrift eds, *Globalization, institutions and regional development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Whatmore, S. and L. Thorne (1997) Nourishing networks: alternative geographies of food. In D. Goodman and M. Watts eds, *Globalizing food: agrarian and global restructuring* (London: Routledge)

Wilkinson, J. (1997) A new paradigm for economic analysis? *Economy and Society* 26, pp. 26-42